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Dining

Azer Baijan

1610 Old Country Rd. [MAP](#)
 Westbury, NY 11590-5256
 516-228-0001

If, a few weeks ago, someone had asked my impression of tabbouleh, I would have characterized the cold bulghur wheat salad as a pleasant enough dish but not something I would crave.

That was before encountering the tabbouleh at Azer Baijan. Here, the fluffy grains with olive oil, lemon, scallions and tomatoes were drizzled with a fruity syrup, dotted with pomegranate. The result was at once sweet, tart, herbal and soothing. Just talking about it makes me long to return to the Turkish-Persian-Mediterranean restaurant in Westbury. Come to think of it, I'd go back in a heartbeat for another serving of kashkeh badenjan, a mellow eggplant, onion and tomato stew crowned with a swirl of flavored yogurt. Or for the supremely smoky eggplant dish called baba ghanoush. Fried sambuseh -- crisp dumplings filled with vegetables and chick peas -- were good but not quite as compelling. But I really liked the crunchy-cruste spinach pie, which was fried, not baked, and none the worse for it.

Chef-owner Saeid Sheiklar, who recently bought the place from his partner, recommended a bottle of Yakut, a light, dry Turkish red wine which we heartily enjoyed. A friend ordered the lamb shank stewed in tomato paste, imbued with remarkable tenderness and depth of flavor. Lamb stew, however, was a bit too tomato-y, the accompanying green rice pilaf overly herbal. But the brown pilaf that accompanied my husband's kofta kebab -- remarkably juicy, garlicky lamb burgers -- was addictive.

It, like many of the dishes here, had been made with saffron ("zaffron," the menu reads), a Persian accent. Sheiklar, it turns out, hails from the part of Azerbaijan now located within modern Iran. Centuries ago, the area was a stop on the trade route between Western Europe and China. The restaurant's repertoire loosely ties in various influences from that part of the globe.

Decidedly Turkish in origin are the chicken chops, butterflied, grilled and marinated drumsticks, which were particularly well-executed here. Another triumph was the kobideh kebab, long skewered cylinders of ground beef and lamb. The kitchen, it seems, can't do enough good things with ground lamb. The highly seasoned adana kebab was just one more case in point.

I tried only one fish dish -- grilled whole striped bass with a lemon and garlic sauce -- but it was exceptional, the exterior smoky and blistered, the flaky interior delicate and fluffy.

The requisite baklava was made with lots of nuts and just enough syrup. But for something properly exotic, go for the faluda, a Persian version of a Sno-Kone made of frozen rice noodles infused with rosewater and topped with sour cherries. For optimal enjoyment, Saied advised, allow the ice to melt before eating it.

The effect, like the restaurant itself, is transporting.

Reviewed by Joan Reminick, 4/22/05.

HOURS
 Lunch, Monday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 3:45 p.m.; dinner, Monday to Saturday, 4 to 11 p.m., Sunday, 4 to 10 p.m.

ASSESSMENT
 Homestyle cuisine from faraway places

CUISINE
 Persian, Turkish

PRICE RANGE
 Inexpensive (Under \$15)

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS
 Fully accessible.



Saeid Sheiklar, owner of Azer Baijan, with an assortment evoking his native region (Newsday Photo/Bill Davis)

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